

Medicine, Medea and the Media:

The Rise and Fall of Roy Meadow

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Abstract

For more than three decades eminent British paediatrician, Professor Sir Roy Meadow, was courted by the media for his startling pronouncements on maternal child murder and abuse, including his now infamous Meadow's Law and his creation of Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy. His compelling evidence made headline news in the trials of several women, including Sally Clark, Donna Anthony, Angela Cannings and Trupti Patel. Journalists, however, persistently failed to investigate Meadow's potent claims, using the eminent paediatrician as a primary source to create highly newsworthy news narratives. Through an analysis of newspaper stories, primarily in the London *Times*, this study maps the rise and fall of Roy Meadow. My critique deploys a narrative trope I have called the Medea-Factor to explore the fictive qualities of news, and to develop an argument for understanding how Roy Meadow became the media's national authority on maternal child murder and abuse, as well as how his glittering career came to an ignominious end. An important key to revealing Meadow's power—and why it was that journalists continued to privilege his voice for so long—came in the unearthing of Meadow's nineteenth-century counterpart, and the first primary definer of infanticide news, Dr Edwin Lankester. This study concludes that the pattern for creating news narratives about mothers accused of murdering their children is so compelling that journalists, even when faced with the evidence of flawed science, will continue to create narratives shaped by the ideology of the Medea-Factor.

The thesis is situated within the discipline of English, and its approach and methodology belong to that discipline. Its textual sources, however, come from newspapers, and to the extent that it is concerned with the use of expert witnesses the thesis engages with matters important to the discipline of journalism and is therefore interdisciplinary.

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Let no one think me a weak one, feeble-spirited,
A stay-at-home, but rather just the opposite,
One who can hurt my enemies and help my friends;
For the lives of such persons are most remembered.

(Medea lines 807-810)

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